

Steel 291

Chapter 291: Arriving in the Kalmar Union

Just like his Journey to Granada, Berengar had taken a Clipper with him to the Kalmar Union. Throughout the journey, Berengar and Honoria had spent most of it within the cabin. The couple made up for lost time in their own way.

By the time they arrived in Copenhagen, the capital of the Kalmar Union, Berengar and Honoria were almost completely drained of energy; they had spent so much time in bed that they were in dire need of some coffee or some protein.

As such, Berengar and Honoria were quite thankful when they arrived at the King's estate, where he greeted them with open arms. Berengar was initially cautious about such a meeting. Still, despite his worries, the King genuinely seemed to embrace the idea of Reformation, or at the very least tolerate it within his Kingdom.

The Kalmar King was a man in his late thirties with a long flowing golden beard and matching hair. His eyes were a pastel blue, and he had quite a large gut. This man was a glutton, as he weighed more than a man his size should. Nevertheless, the man known as King Alvar quickly greeted Berengar with a pleasant smile on his face.

"Duke Berengar of Austria, your reputation proceeds you! Welcome to my humble abode! I look forward to speaking with you over the coming days."

Seeing the white-haired beauty standing next to Berengar, who was dressed in a mint green gown with golden embroidery, and a fur coat draped over it. The King's eyes instantly widened; this young woman was among the most beautiful women he had ever seen, and as such, he greatly desired her. However, the moment he gazed at her with lustful intent, Heraclius, who was perched upon her shoulder, screeched at him with hostility.

Thus the King was started; upon seeing this, Berengar chuckled slightly before giving the King of Scandinavia a fair warning.

"I wouldn't get any ideas if I were you; that bird is over-protective of the Lady Valeria..."

As usual, Berengar used Honoria's disguise as a cover; since he was bringing her along as his plus one, he had decided to use one of the girl's aliases. Of course, Honoria now had two aliases; one was an ordinary orphan and a privateer who was known as "Valeria Zonara," and the other was the Lady "Valeria Melodia," which was a more enhanced version of her initial alias.

Until Berengar could marry the girl as his third wife, he had to be careful about her real identity. Since he was bringing her along with him on his journey to the Kalmar Union, he had to develop a new noble identity for her; as such, he and the princess spent some time on their journey overhauling her alias.

Luckily Scandinavia was so far away from the Byzantine Empire that there was no way to confirm her identity quickly. Thus the King instantly began to greet the woman known as Lady "Valeria."

"Apologies if I offended your pet, my Lady, it won't happen again."

To this, Berengar struggled to contain himself from snickering; as such, he grabbed ahold of Honoria's waist and dragged her into his embrace.

"The Lady Valeria is my lover, so I would advise you not to get any unhealthy thoughts about her..."

The intent was clear; Berengar was making a stance immediately to avoid any necessary drama; of course, the King of the Kalmar Union noticed this and immediately backed off. He had no desire to pick a fight with Austria, especially over a woman.

Thus he let go of his thoughts regarding Honoria and helped Berengar and his host move into his Castle. It was now close to wintertime, and it was dreadfully cold in Denmark. Thus Berengar and his subordinates were appropriately dressed in fine furs.

After getting settled into the same room Honoria and Berengar prepared themselves for the feast that was about to transpire. As such, they approached the Dining Hall where a large group of people was sitting. Catholics, Reformists, and Noblemen all gathered in the Dining Hall to greet Berengar.

Upon seeing this, Berengar was quite entertained by the idea of Catholics and Reformists sitting at the same table sharing bread while the rest of the Christian world was at war over their minor differences. When Berengar sat down at the table next to Honoria, they all began to say grace.

After that was finished, they dug into their meal, where the head of the local Reformist Church began to speak to Berengar as if he were a legendary figure.

"Your Grace, I must profess that I am a huge fan of your work; spreading the gospel to all of the people of Germany was a bold move, and I admire your bravery."

As for the Catholics, they had rather sour expressions. Under the decree of the King of the Kalmar Union, all Christian faiths were tolerated, The King may be a glutton, but he had seen what was happening in Germany and Bohemia and dreaded the idea of such a thing happening within his own realm.

Because of this, he had enacted law of religious tolerance and enforced peace between the burgeoning reformist faction and the Catholic Church within Scandinavia. Thus the Catholics were in a difficult position at the table, as they could not openly make a move against the man known as Berengar, "the Accursed."

Upon hearing this, Bernegar nodded towards the reformist and addressed his concerns.

"I believe it is essential for the average person to read the word of God and understand it within its entirety. There are many things the Catholic Church preaches that are based on the tradition founded upon pagan beliefs, rather than the word of Christ!"

Though the Catholics wanted to jump up in response to this comment, the King eyed them carefully with an authoritative gaze; as such, they calmed themselves and ate from the food provided at the table.

Seeing the Catholics behaving themselves, Berengar decided to bring up the topic in his mind as he addressed everyone at the table.

"Seeing Catholics and Reformists sharing a meal so peacefully is precisely the vision I had when I started my reformist movement. Unfortunately in Germany, and Bohemia, the Vatican holds too much power and sought to destroy us.

I am glad to see that you, King Alvar have such firm control over your lands that you can allow the peaceful co-existence of our two beliefs systems."

On the one hand, this was a compliment to King Alvar and the Kalmar Union; on the other hand, it was an insult to the Catholics, implying that they hold too much power over the laws of man and that secular rule was more important.

Nevertheless, both King Alvar and his Reformist members of his Court were happy to hear Berengar's compliment, and as such, King Alvar began to speak to Berengar.

"You honor me, oh mighty Duke of Austria; I have heard of your exploits; in the taverns, they sing songs about you as if you were some ancient folk hero. The man who commands thunder! That is what some of the bards are referring to you as."

Berengar chuckled at this remark before responding.

"I claim no such thing, I simply command thousands of men with thousands of guns, and their echo merely resembles thunder."

After hearing this, King Alvar began to laugh, so much so that he began to choke on the food he was eating. The moment he did so, the people in the room began to panic; before long, the man was keeled over, trying his hardest to breathe.

Luckily Berengar was in the room and immediately sprang to action where he got behind the man and used the Heimlich maneuver he had learned during his duration in the army in his previous life.

After a few attempts, the King spat out the chunk of meat lodged in his throat and gasped for air. It took the King a few moments to realize what had happened; after doing so, he got up from his feet and patted Berengar on the back.

"I owe you my life!"

To this, Berengar merely shrugged his hand off and replied calmly.

"It was nothing; I know you would have done the same..."

Despite knowing for a fact that Alvar was incapable of doing such a thing, Berengar's humble attitude in the act of heroism left a favorable impression on the Scandinavian nobility who had gathered at the table.

With that said, King Alvar returned to his seat, where he began to make a toast before drinking from his chalice.

"To a lasting friendship with Austria!"

Afterward, the people of the Court began to drink away their shock and chat among themselves. Though Berengar knew he would not be able to easily establish a military alliance with the Kalmar Union, this coincidental event was enough to help secure him in their good graces. At the very least, he would not have to worry about an invasion from the North for the time being.

Chapter 292: Fishing and Diplomacy

Berengar awoke bright and early on the cold near winter's morning; he was lying naked in a feather bed covered in bear fur; Honoria's beautiful bare figure was lying next to him. She was wrapped lovingly around him as if she was utterly unwilling to let him out of her sight, even in her sleep.

As for Heraclius, he was sitting perched on the stand Honoria had brought with her for the pet eagle, giving Berengar the stink eye. The more Heraclius stared at Berengar with his master, the more protective he felt.

Regardless Berengar returned the Eagle's fierce stare with a wicked smile; after doing so, he grabbed ahold of Honoria's sizeable bust and squeezed it softly before kissing her on the lips. The girl quickly awoke after feeling this and stared into Berengar's sapphire eyes.

He was not wearing his eyepatch at the moment, and as such, she was able to see his scarred pupil, along with his perfectly intact one, which she rarely

got to see. Despite the grievous injury, she was not in the least bit frightened; if anything, in her mind, it added to Berengar's character.

As such, she cupped his face lovingly as she pushed him down onto the bed and began to kiss him passionately upon the neck. Before long, the two were going at it once more, and Heraclius had decided to shield his eyes with his wing.

Since he was trapped in this room with a closed window, there was no way for him to escape the scene; as such, he did his best to avoid it. The entire journey had been like this, and he was beginning to get annoyed with the young couple.

After some time, Honoria and Bernegar got dressed, where they greeted the King and his family at the dining table for breakfast. After the previous night, King Alvar and Berengar had gotten along quite well, both men had a penchant for drinking, and Berengar had saved his life.

However, Berengar asked for nothing in return, insisting that he was merely doing the right thing and that righteous action should not be repaid as a favor. The reason for this was quite simple, in front of the Scandinavian Reformists, they would see this as proof of Berengar's supposed true nature, despite the Catholic Church's slander.

As for the Catholic Church, they could not use the event to smear his name, and thus Berengar had bought himself some good publicity in the eyes of the Scandinavian people.

Truthfully Berengar did not want a military alliance with the Kalmar Union. He was confident there would be some conflicts with them in the future over the Schleswig-Holstein question. Thus what Berengar wanted in this visit was to establish a beneficial trade agreement between the two realms and a non-aggression pact.

His goal with this breakfast was to enhance further his relations with the Royal Family of the Kalmar Union. Thus Berengar was seated next to Honoria as they dined upon the simple food. It was mainly rye bread, cabbage, and salted pork.

As Berengar ate the food, he inquired about the King's plans for the day.

"So, King Alvar, tell me, what do you have planned for today?"

Seeing as how King Alvar was entertaining a vital guest, he decided to do something recreational, and as such, he stared at Berengar across the table with a fat grin on his face.

"I was thinking of going fishing. Would you like to tag along?"

Without a second's hesitation, Berengar nodded his head and accepted the offer.

"If you are offering, then I would be happy to accept."

Upon hearing this, Honoria instantly began to tug on Berengar's sleeve with a pouting expression. She did not want to be left alone with the Royal family and a contingent of guards. Nevertheless, Berengar needed to secure his goals in this visit, and as such, he had to leave her behind. After all, fishing was a task where men could bond, and a woman's presence would ruin it.

As such, Alvar's house and Berengar's host enjoyed a simple breakfast filled with acceptable banter; it was not until that afternoon where Berengar and King Alvar departed from the Castle and approached the docks of Copenhagen, where they began to cast out the lines of their fishing rods and angle for a meal.

Though the medieval fishing rod was different than the gear Berengar was accustomed to in the 21st century from his past life, he quickly adapted to it and before long was sitting back and waiting for a bite.

As he did so, he reached into his fur coat and pulled out a wineskin where he began to drink from it; after doing so, he wiped off the lid before handing it over to King Alvar. Alvar nodded at Berengar as he took a sip from the wineskin; after doing so, he handed it right back to Berengar.

As the two men sipped on fortified wine while fishing off the coast of Copenhagen, Berengar eventually broke the silence and asked the question on his mind.

"Can I ask you something, your Highness?"

Hearing Berengar speak in such a severe tone made the King curious, and as such, he nodded his head silently, giving Berengar permission to ask his question.

"What do you intend to do when the Pope finally declares a Crusade on the German Reformation?"

By now, the wineskin had made its way back into Alvar's hand, and as such, he took a big gulp before responding to the question with another question.

"What do you think I should do about it?"

It was apparent the man was testing Berengar. The man was all too aware of the stories of Bernegar's conquests. He knew that so long as the Catholic Church held significant power, the two factions would fight each other until one managed to gain dominance.

He also knew Berengar did not plan to sit back in Austria quietly and most likely had grand ambitions. As such, he was curious if Berengar would call in a favor for saving his life now that they were in private. However, Berengar's answer was not what he expected. Instead, Berengar spoke clearly and confidently as he outlined exactly how he thought the future events would unfold.

"Honestly, it is in the best interest of you and your people not to get involved, you have already promoted tolerance of Christian faiths in your land, if you choose one side, you will only be inviting internal chaos, and I have no desire to see the Kalmar Union tear itself apart from internal strife."

Berengar could have further elaborated about the strength of his army versus that of the crusaders. Instead, he chose to keep it short and straightforward, in doing so, nudging towards the idea of a non-aggression pact.

As such, the response from King Alvar was one of surprise; truthfully, he had spent the previous night lamenting the debt he owed Berengar after his life

was saved, as he did not want to get involved with the Crusade. As such, he began to speak to Berengar with caution as he attempted to clarify the issue at hand.

"You don't want me to send troops to your aid?"

In response to this question, Berengar merely shook his head as he answered honestly.

"Rather than ask for your support, I would prefer you make your stance known to the world that you have no intent to get involved. Sign a Non-Aggression pact between our two realms, and I can sleep easy knowing that an invasion from the Far North is not a possibility."

Upon hearing this, King Alvar sighed heavily; he felt as if a great weight on his heart had been released; as such, he nodded his head and placed out his hand to shake upon the agreement.

"Deal!"

With that said, the two men shook hands, agreeing not to attack each other in the near future. Shortly after that, Berengar's line began to bob, and he immediately began angling for the fish. After a brief struggle, Berengar was able to reel it in. The two men smiled as they gazed upon the size of the fish that Berengar had caught. It was a North Sea cod, and its size was about 100 lbs and was close to five feet in size.

Upon seeing this, Alvar was amazed; Among all of the cod, he had ever seen fished from the shore this was one of the biggest. As such, the two men were eager to have the fish gutted and cooked so that they could eat it.

Thus, the two men returned to the Castle to draft an official non-aggression pact between Austria and the Kalmar Union. By doing this Berengar ensured that no man from Scandinavia would enter his realm during the next Crusade. If they did so, they would be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Chapter 293: I Can Die Happy Now

Several weeks had passed since Berengar first visited the Kalmar Union. The day after returning from his fishing trip with King Alvar, Berengar and the

Scandinavian king signed a non-aggression pact between Austria and the Kalmar Union into effect.

The two men also signed a comprehensive trade agreement designed to bring wealth to both countries via open trade of raw materials. As such, Berengar was able to acquire raw materials like timber and furs at a reasonable price.

After returning home, Berengar found himself fulfilling his promise to his dear lover. Linde monopolized a week's worth of Berengar's time, refusing to allow him to work during that period. As such, he spent the days with his beautiful young lover. When they weren't making love, they were spending time as a family with their children.

During this time, Honoria had spent it training the crew she was raising, and as such, rarely saw Berengar. After all, she was well aware of the promise he had made to Linde and had no plans to intrude upon them.

Before Berengar knew it, his birthday had arrived, and with it, winter had officially begun. Today was December 21st, 1420, and it was Berengar's twenty-fourth birthday. As such, numerous guests had arrived to celebrate it, and though Berengar wanted to keep the attendance to a minimum, he could not very well decline those who had shown up.

To Berengar, a birthday was just any other day, and he had never really cared for it; after all, he had spent the overwhelming majority of his birthdays in his past life alone and thus felt uncomfortable having so many people over celebrating what to him was just an average day.

After being surrounded by various guests for some time, Berengar finally managed to escape their grasp as he went to his balcony, where he began to smoke some hemp. Berengar had long since cultivated the material for the textile industry, but now and then, when his nerves were in a wreck, he would smoke some hemp.

Unlike cannabis, hemp flower contained a shallow content of THC, and as such, he did not get high. However, it did have a large amount of CBD, and thus it aided with relaxation. As long as there was no tobacco for him to smoke, hemp was pretty much the best way for him to calm his nerves.

Eventually, his smoking session came to a halt when Adela appeared behind Berengar and wrapped her hands over his eyes. The moment she did, she asked the question on her mind with a pretty smile on her face.

"Guess who?"

The moment Berengar heard this, a smile appeared on his face as he put out the Hemp cigarette; he then grabbed ahold of Adela's dainty hands before answering her question.

"Adela, I know it's you..."

Because Berengar had not played along with the young woman's games, she immediately let go of him and began to pout. The moment Berengar saw this, he thought it was adorable and petted her silky golden hair in response.

This only caused Adela to pout further as she was still being treated as a child, despite her growth over the last few years. After seeing this, Berengar extended his hand out as he looked back inside at the party that was taking place in the ballroom. In doing so, he asked Adela the question she most likely wanted to hear.

"Would you care for a dance?"

After hearing this, all of Adela's discontent flew out the window, and she immediately began to smile as she grasped ahold of Berengar's hand, where he led her to the dance floor. Though it had been a while since they had last danced, Berengar did not forget the movements and began to waltz with his fiancée as the crowd of guests watched.

As usual, Berengar had stolen the show with his graceful appearance and a beautiful girl by his side, and thus all eyes had drawn themselves to him and his young fiancée. As for Linde and Honoria, they watched with envious expressions. The two women hatched a plan in their minds at the same time and began to communicate with one another in secret.

The moment Berengar had finished his dance with Adela, both Linde and Honoria approached him; despite his exhaustion from the event, Berengar

could see the keen interest in their eyes and reached out his hand towards Linde where he began to dance with her for some time.

The guests gazed upon Berengar and his lover with complicated expressions. Berengar's affair with Linde was well known to the Austrian nobility at this point, after all, he had two children with the girl, and despite this scandal, there were few brave enough to rebuke it openly.

However, what truly shocked them was that after Berengar had danced with both Adela and Linde, he took Honoria's hand and waltzed with her as well. Few people outside of Kufstein knew of Berengar's newest acquisition, and as such, they were pretty surprised to see that Berengar had potentially taken another lover.

After all, the way the two looked at each other was as passionate as the others. As such, a new rumor would begin to spread as the nobility of Austria attempted to inquire about the identity of the young white-haired woman who was by Berengar's side.

Eventually, the dancing ended, and Berengar opened his presents; it was primarily lavish gifts that Berengar had no use for. Nevertheless, he thanked every one of the guests who provided them before moving on to the cake.

Soon the celebration came to an end, and the guests who had visited Kufstein had departed from the castle, their goal being to spend the night in the lodgings provided for them within Kufstein city. Adela and her family stayed behind and were granted access to the castle.

After spending some time drinking with Marquess Otto, who Berengar had promoted from a Count to his current position after rising to power, Berengar returned to his quarters where a surprise present was waiting for him.

Upon entering his bed-chambers, he noticed two beautiful young women dressed in a nearly matching pair of translucent silk negligees. Linde's exceptionally curvy body showed through the sky blue material, revealing her perky pink nipples beneath them.

As for Honoria, she was dressed in the same garment but in the color of mint green to match her own eyes. Unlike Linde, who was quite amorous by

nature, Honoria was blushing profusely as she held onto Linde's hand for encouragement.

The two had arranged that their gift for Berengar would be something special, and as such, they decided to present themselves for his enjoyment on his birthday night. The moment Berengar saw the two gorgeous girls dressed in such enticing attire, all of his exhaustion accumulated throughout the day vanished from his body, and he shut the door behind him.

As he approached the bed, Linde took the lead and was the first to speak as she got up and began to disrobe Berengar.

"Master, this is your gift for tonight; please make use of your slave however you see fit!"

Honoria struggled to speak the lustful thoughts she had prepared in her head to entice Berengar; after she approached Berengar to help Linde disrobe him, the young duke grabbed ahold of her plump bottom and squeezed it, which caused her to lose her thought process. After a few seconds, she calmed herself, despite her flushed appearance, and spoke her mind.

"Daddy, show me your love; Linde and I are prepared to satisfy you in whatever way you desire tonight!"

Berengar struggled to contain his growing lust, and after he was fully undressed, pushed the two girls on the bed and pounced on them like a tiger in heat. He would spend the entire night making love to his two women; it was only after the dawn had risen and the three of them were covered in sweat, among other bodily fluids, that they fell asleep in each other's arms.

As Berengar began to pass out, one final thought appeared on his mind.

"I can die happy now..."

He had no way of knowing it, but this event had strengthened the bonds between the three of them. Eventually, such a scene would become routine for Berengar and his lovers. At the moment, he was thoroughly enjoying his peaceful life. However, peace never lasted for long, and soon enough, Austria would be thrust into another war.

Chapter 294: Assembling a Crew II

Since Berengar's birthday, a total of three months had passed, and it was now the early months of 1421; throughout these past few months, Honoria had worked on assembling a crew from the wayward women of not only Austria but the nearby regions as well. Germans, Italians, Moors, and Serbs had gathered among the ranks of her privateer crew and trained efficiently in the art of sailing.

At the moment, Berengar was standing before Honoria, who was dressed in her privateer Captain's attire. He was the only free man allowed onboard the 20 gun sloop of war which Honoria had named the "Honoria's Revenge" after herself. Though few knew her actual identity, and as such, it was presumed to be named after the missing Byzantine Princess.

Berengar had brought a few weapons crates with him on board, where he then opened them to reveal the contents hidden within. When the woman around him gazed at the weapons, they were not surprised. Honoria had promised that Berengar would provide them with firearms; however, when he explained the function of the guns, they were shocked to hear it.

"These are the 1421 Repeating Rifled Muskets. They are capable of firing 30-60 rounds a minute and are appropriately rifled. They utilize the .58 caliber minie ball projectile, and I assure you are lethal out to three hundred yards, even if your opponent is armored in full plate."

Berengar had to look out for Honoria, and since her entire crew was comprised of women, he ensured she was adequately equipped to defeat men in battle. As such, he created a series of firearms based upon the Jennings rifle from his previous life.

The Jennings rifle was a percussion cap rifle that used superposed loads to rapidly fire multiple shots from a single barrel in a short amount of time. Due to the lack of mercury fulminate, Berengar had altered the design to a flintlock action.

The Jennings rifle that the 1421 Repeating Rifled Musket was based on consists of a single barrel and lock, which could fire twenty charges in two seconds per charge. The rifle utilized a sliding lock and multiple touchholes similar to earlier designs.

The firearm also utilized a mechanism for automatically priming the pan of the lock. In simpler terms, this was a flintlock repeating rifle, whereby simply cocking the gun and pulling the trigger up to twenty rounds could be fired off down range rapidly.

Berengar also designed pistols based upon this principle as sidearms for the women to wield; essentially, they would be able to effectively engage any man in combat without the need to draw blades. The reason for this was because they could simply fire over twenty rounds without ever needing to reload their weapons.

With this in mind, Berengar decided to demonstrate the weapons as he handed Honoria the first repeating flintlock; she had long since been trained in their use. As such, the princess began to teach her privateers how to load the weapons before she tested them on a series of targets set up on the shore.

The moment Honoria cocked the flintlock action and fired at a distance of a hundred yards, the minie ball projectile struck through the steel breastplate that was adorned atop the straw target and blasted through the other side with ease.

Before anyone had time to react, she cocked the action again and fired another precise shot towards the next target. She repeated this a total of twenty times, hitting most of the dummies in the process. One could say under Berengar's supervision; she had become an excellent marksman; after all, there were few things hotter than a woman who knew how to handle a gun.

After smoking her targets, Honoria turned around with a broad smile and asked Berengar the question on her mind.

"Did I do good, daddy?"

At this point, she was so used to calling Berengar by that term that it did not even cross her mind that all of her crew members were present to witness it. Berengar, on the other hand, was still not entirely on board with the whole thing and, as such, cleared his throat before responding.

"You did well..."

After hearing this, Honoria smiled before jumping off the bow and into Berengar's arms before kissing his cheek. All of her crewmembers were stunned by Honoria's actions, they had no idea that Honoria had such a relationship with the Duke of Austria, but they suddenly understood why they were permitted to engage in such a deadly profession.

The only member among the crew who knew what kind of relationship Honoria had with Berengar was Melissa. The latter had given up the life of a peaceful employee of a textile factory to join Honoria's privateering crew. If the princess was going to go out on adventures and get herself in trouble, Melissa wanted to be by her side to help.

After this embarrassing display of affection, Berengar began handing out the weapons and training the women in their use; this would be their next goal now that they were semi-experienced sailors. As such, the operation of the repeating muskets and cannons was the next step in the training of this wayward crew of wenches.

While Honoria was training the women, Elfrun, in particular, was messing with something far more sinister. She had been educated in Berengar's public education system and had always been interested in chemistry. Thus she had begun experimenting with explosives ever since she joined Honoria's crew.

Despite being in her early teens, one could say the young girl had become quite obsessed with the explosives such as grenades. As such, she was playing with one of those same explosives when Berengar walked over to her.

After doing so, she looked up at him with a murderous glint in her eyes, which Berengar found to be quite odd. However, the girl's following words explained her reasoning perfectly.

"Go away... womanizer."

In Elfrun's eyes, there was little difference between Berengar and the lower nobleman who tried to purchase her. They were both the same, lecherous men who abused their wealth and power to get what they wanted; as such, she had no interest in talking to Berengar.

Upon hearing this, Berengar chuckled and nodded his head before walking away; the only thing he said to the girl before departing were the words.

"You're not wrong..."

Afterward, he left the girl who was playing with grenades to her own devices. Hopefully, she wouldn't do something stupid and irresponsible with those explosives. As such, Berengar returned to Honoria and began to flirt with her; while he did this, Elfrun's gaze did not escape his trail, and she immediately bit her lip upon seeing the way Honoria acted around the young Duke.

Berengar spent the day getting to know Honoria's various crew members that she had rallied together, and by the end of it, he was quite pleased with the results. At the very least, he could trust these women around his lover.

Though they did not appear like much, this crew would soon become notorious on the Mediterranean sea, and their actions would inspire many young men to take up arms in privateering on behalf of the Crown of Austria.

Honoria would be the first to usher in a new era of Naval Warfare, one that Berengar greatly anticipated. As Honoria and her crew of salty wenches began to transition into the life of privateering, other events were transpiring across the world, but those are tales for another time.

Chapter 295: Marching on Cairo

Months had passed since Honoria assembled her crew, and now on the other edge of the Mediterranean in the lands of Pharaohs and Kings, Arethas was in the process of humbling the Mamluk Sultanate.

With the military aid provided to him by the Duchy of Austria, the Byzantine forces stationed in North Africa had made substantial progress, so much so that they were now outside Cairo's gates.

Despite the stable walls built around the proud city, the thunder of dozens of falconets could be overheard by the residents within those walls. With every volley, the city began to shake, and the one-pound cannon balls chipped away at the stone fortifications that had protected the civilians within it for generations.

If Cairo were seized, then the rest of the Egyptian province would fall shortly after. The Mamluke's last bastion in the easternmost region of the Mediterranean was on the verge of collapse. As such, its defenders desperately fired arrows down upon the Byzantine troops.

Unlike Berengar's forces, which were armored over their vital regions with quenched and hardened high carbon steel plate armor, the troops of the Byzantine Empire were armored primarily in mild steel mirror-pattern armor, over a mail hauberk.

Because of this, there were still some significant gaps in their protection. Thus the arrows and bolts fired by the Mamluke archers were capable of finding their way through those gaps and, as a result, significantly injured the Byzantine Soldiers, if not outright killing them.

Currently, Arethas was standing at the rear of the siege camp that had been set up, watching his artillerymen fire the falconet cannons, while his arquebusiers resisted the enemy's fire. Those brave Byzantine soldiers unleashed their destructive volleys upon the enemy defenders while being pelted with arrows and bolts.

As the Byzantine arquebusiers fired upon the defenders, their projectiles made their way up onto the ramparts. Those Mamlukes unfortunate to be hit by the volley found their armor shredded, and their lives lost. Blood splattered across the battlefield as the number of deaths began to skyrocket.

After several hours of heated conflict, the bombardments ceased, and the soldiers of both sides returned to their quarters. For the Byzantines, they had set up a standard medieval siege camp outside the city's gates.

Inside this camp, Arethas chastised his artillery officers; due to the cast iron material that these guns were made of, they could not sustain a continuous bombardment, unlike the high carbon steel that Berengar had fashioned his cannons from.

They needed time to cool down, or else they would risk a rupture in the bore. Thus the siege had been progressing slower than he initially wanted it to. Who was to take the blame for such a thing? Naturally, it fell to the artillery officers.

"How come those walls are still standing? It has been nearly a week since we have begun our bombardment, and yet to my surprise; we are still standing out here in the desert with our thumbs up our asses! Bring down those walls, or else!"

The Artillery officers looked at one another with confused expressions. They did not dare reveal that Decentius, who was the second Prince of the Empire, and Arethas' right-hand man had ordered them to sustain a bombardment long enough to draw the defenders' attention.

The reason for this was shrouded in conspiracy, and Arethas was unaware of it, as such, he continued to chastise the artillery officers.

"I swear if that wall is not brought down by tomorrow morning, your heads will be--"

During mid-sentence, Arethas cut his words short as the ground had begun to quake, and with it, an eruption had occurred. This was no simple earthquake; soon, the fortifications around the City of Cairo began to crumble.

Walls and watchtowers began to fall to the ground as the very foundation they were built upon blasted itself apart. It was as if hell itself had decided to sprout from within the cities. The screams of the defending soldiers and the citizens within echoed in the air as a giant explosive blast filled the air.

Arethas watched this horrific sight in shock as he gazed upon the destruction wrought upon the city of Cairo; before long, he could overhear Prince Decentius, who was his second in command, and godson cheering in the distance as he screamed at the top of his lungs.

"For the Empire!"

with his chant, all of the soldiers in the Byzantine camp began to cheer with him. As Arethas looked around the battlefield and the destruction that was wrought upon it, there was little time before the Byzantines rallied behind Decentius and charged into the ruins of the city.

With the Prince leading the charge, the Byzantines rushed past the broken walls and began to stick their pikes in the flesh of any man unfortunate enough to be still breathing after such a catastrophic event.

Blood began to fill the streets of Cairo as the Byzantine soldiers claimed the lives of every soul within its gates. No man, woman, or child was spared the slaughter that Decentius had ordered. Such a thing had never occurred under Arethas' watch, and as such, the brave Strategos instantly tried to stop the senseless murder.

However, before the man could do so, he found himself beset on all sides by his soldiers, who had lowered their pikes in his direction. These men had been under his care for years, and yet now they were preventing him from stopping Decentius's merciless butchering of the city.

Arethas, the great Strategos of Ionia and commander of the Emperor's armies in North Africa, had no way of knowing that Prince Decentius had gone behind his back and had ordered a tunnel to be built beneath the city where it was filled with explosive casks along its foundation.

When this task was finally completed, one of the explosive barrels was lit aflame and before long exploded, resulting in a chain reaction that tore the city to pieces. Why did Decentius do this? It was because he wanted the glory of conquering the last vestige of Mamluke power in Egypt for himself.

After having failed to locate the runaway Princesses' whereabouts, Decentius had been mired in disgrace and shunned by his father. He knew that the only way to redeem himself was to claim a great military victory on his own.

With this action, Cairo had fallen, and the prestige that came with it entered the young Prince's grasp. By doing so, Decentius had made a name for himself as the Conqueror of Egypt and would likely convince many of his father's supporters to aid him in his war for succession against his elder brother.

Arethas was held at bay for some time until not a single living Mamluke was present within the city; only after all life had been snuffed out of existence did Decentius appear before the pike wall that had surrounded the mighty Strategos.

When Arethas gazed upon his godson, all he could see was malice in the boy's eyes. Arethas knew not what Decentius's intentions were, as such he decided to interrogate the boy for his treacherous actions.

"Decentius! This was your plan? Do you realize what you have done? The Mamlukes will never forgive the blood you have shed this day!"

As Decentius heard this, his expression became downcast as he spoke the words that weighed on his heart.

"I will mourn your loss, Arethas; you were like a father to me; if it were not for that bitch Honoria and her antics, I would not have to resort to this! Forgive me, my friend!"

With that said, Decentius grabbed ahold of a nearby pike and thrust it through the neck of the Strategos of Ionia, where Arethas began to choke on his blood. As he did so, Decentius retrieved the weapon and held onto Arethas, gazing into his eyes as the man's soul slowly departed from this world.

Not once did Arethas ever expect that he would be betrayed by the young man he thought of as his son. In the end, the mighty Strategos of Ionia, who was supposed to reconquer North Africa, with the weapons Berengar had provided him.

The man who was supposed to use his friendship with Berengar to create an alliance between Austria and Byzantium was reported to have died in battle during the early days of the war. The conquest of Egypt and Lybia would be known to history as a feat achieved by Decentius Palaiologos.

What effect these events would have on the relations between the Duchy of Austria and the Byzantine Emperor would remain to be seen. One thing was certain; if Honoria were ever to become aware of the betrayal that her brother had done unto the late Strategos of Ionia, she would stop at nothing to have his head.

Chapter 296: Invasion of Murcia

Months had gone by since the conflict in Iberia had reignited. At the moment, Hasan was at the head of his army, backed by Arnulf and his other officers who acted in an advisory capacity to the Granadan forces.

In front of their army of 15,000 men was an army of 20,000 Iberians. This army was just one of the many units at the disposal of Granada's enemies. As for the troops at Hasan's command, this was the maximum amount of soldiers he could field at the moment.

Hasan had boldly taken an offensive stance in this conflict after months of defending his borders; as such, he was attacking a region owned by Castile known as Murcia. This region was on the borders of his Emirate and once belonged to the Moors.

Due to centuries of Reconquista, the Moors had been continuously pushed back from the land they had conquered in Iberia to the point that now the Emirate of Granada was all that remained. Before Berengar endorsed the Sultan, it appeared as if the Moors would be pushed out of the region entirely.

Yet now, with the military aid that had been given to them, they were able to hold their ground for the time being. As such, Hasan had taken advantage of the situation to press into Murcia. With General Arnulf nearby, Hasan felt the need to ask the Austrian the question on his mind.

"What do you think of our chances?"

To this, Arnulf scratched his chin before responding.

"If your army fulfills their duty to the standards we have trained them in, I'd say there's at least a 60% chance of victory..."

This figure did not make Hasan very hopeful, however, it was best not to dwell on such things; as such, he sighed heavily before giving his officers their orders.

"Prepare the cannons to fire, tell the arquebusiers to load their weapons, and begin their march. The pikeman shall protect their flanks, as for the Cavalry form on me!"

At this point, Hasan unsheathed his ivory and gold-hilted Damascus steel shamshir and raised it into the air as he began to trod forth with his Cavalry. The heavily armored Granadan horsemen started their descent from the

hilltop above as the falconet cannons began to open fire on the Iberian Union's forces.

The one-pound cannonballs flew at great speed into the ranks of the enemy forces, shattering through their shields and armor and sending those unfortunate enough to get hit by them directly into the afterlife.

In response to this, the Catholic Knights immediately began their charge at the infantry; however, the pikes were lowered, scaring the horses to run amok. When they got near, the massive pike wall sent several Knights thrown off their steeds and onto the ground below where the pikes were thrust into them.

Some of the Knights were unfortunate enough to have gaps in their armor pierced, and as such were wounded, or possibly killed as their blood oozed onto the field below. Others simply got up from the ground and tried to break through the pike wall.

However, when they did so, the arquebusiers who had been holding their shots opened fire on the knights and men at arms in front of them, sending their lead projectiles through their torsos and helmets and claiming their lives in the hundreds.

Many of the soldiers missed their shots, and after the volley had been fired, they began to reload their weapons, first by taking off the lit match and holding it to the side, then by opening one of the twelve apostles that hung from their bandolier, these so-called apostles contained the powder and shot necessary to load the arquebuse firearms.

They then poured the apostle's contents down the barrel before compacting the powder and shot into the barrel with their ramrods. After finishing that step, they had placed the ramrod back in its socket before raising the gun, where they poured some powder from their flask into the pan. After doing so, they put the match back on the lock and cocked it back into action before presenting their arms at the enemy.

The entire process took close to a minute for the Granadan troops to complete, and while they had done so, they were being protected by the ranks of pikemen who rushed into the fray and kept the enemy at bay.

The battle raged on, and the Pikemen withdrew from the front allowing the Arkebusiers to aim their weapons and fire another shot into the mix. With the Catholic Knights sorely defeated, the Granadan Cavalry struck at the rear of the Iberian formation.

Under Hasan's leadership, the Cavalry had circled the enemy troops and attacked from the rear, causing chaos and devastation among their ranks. The lances and swords utilized by the Granadan Cavalry as they attacked the hostile soldiers pierced through their weak spots and claimed their lives, spilling blood and bile onto the field in the process.

As Hasan was riding on horseback, a cannonball whizzed past his head, nearly claiming his life; the moment it did so, the young Sultan almost pissed his pants in fear. Nevertheless, he calmed himself and pressed on as his soldiers trampled through the Granadans ranks.

Seeing that the Cavalry had now gotten in range of the friendly cannons, Arnful waved a small flag signaling the Artillery to cease their attack. As such, they immediately complied with their orders and waited for the battle to resolve itself.

Arnulf was smirking as he gazed upon the field, the medieval forces of the Iberian Union were not ready for the era of pike and shot, and the victories that had been achieved up until this point was proof of such a thing.

Arnulf had no idea how Berengar had come up with such viable strategies, but he was there when Bernegar's armies made use of them during the war with Kitzbühel; it had been a little over three years since that minor border war, and yet in that time so much had happened.

The young Viscount could hardly believe how far he had come in this time, and it was all thanks to one man, even if that man was a filthy degenerate who used the German Reformation as an excuse to absolve himself of his actions in the public eye.

As such, a wry smile appeared on the man's face as he reflected on his past. While he was doing this, the Iberian forces had begun to route, and thus, Arnulf snapped to attention, waving a flag in the air signaling the Granadan troops to halt.

Eventually, the message was spread, and the Granadans ceased their pursuit of the Iberian Union's army. Though this was not a victory that caused significant casualties to the enemies, it had severely weakened their morale and, more importantly, opened up their path to controlling the province.

With the battle over, Arnulf rode down with his officers into the field alongside the Grandan troops who had begun to clean up the battlefield, taking anything of value from the fallen Iberian forces and leaving the rest for the crows to feast upon.

After arriving in front of Hasan, Arnulf decided to give the man congratulations for his victory.

"Your Eminence, Sultan Hasan Al-Fadl, I congratulate you for your victory on this day. Let this be a reminder to the Catholic scum who dare to invade your lands that even a wolf that has been backed into a corner still has teeth!"

Upon hearing this, Hasan, whose armor was stained in the blood of his enemies, began to laugh.

"Well said, my Austrian friend. However, now is not the time to celebrate; first, we must win this war!"

With that said, the war in Iberia had begun to escalate, as the Granadan forces would soon seize control of Murcia and make further conquests into Catholic territory; the battle here in the Murcian plains was the first of the Emirates of Granada's offensive campaign against their enemies.

Chapter 297: Minting New Currency

Now that Berengar had established supreme reign over the Duchy of Austria and had begun the process of incorporating the silver and gold mines from throughout the Austrian alps, he decided it was now time to introduce a national currency.

Gold was severely limited at this time. Until he could gain the vast wealth of a region like Mexico, or South Africa, he had no means to acquire a substantial sum of the coveted material as such, Berengar had decided to keep with the silver standard.

The most significant problem that the Austrian economy had faced up until this point was that the currency's production was completely localized. The size and quality of the currency entirely depended on regional rulers, and as such, it was horribly debased.

Thus Berengar had opted to revitalize the Austrian coinage and in the process make it the universal standard for trade in all of Europe, especially now that his trade reached most corners of the Mediterranean.

Thus, with the stroke of a pen, Berengar utilized his executive authority to establish the Coinage Act of 1420. With this, he intended to create a stable centralized currency in the hands of the Austrian Government, and by Austrian Government, he meant himself.

This so-called Austrian Thaler was minted with his visage on the front and the Austiran Reichsadler, or Double-Eagle on the back. It had a finely made reeded edge and was quite aesthetically pleasing.

The silver thaler was made of 99.9% fine silver; it weighed one troy ounce and had a diameter of 1.5 inches, with a thickness of 0.13 inches. This silver coin was exceptional when compared to the previous currency used within the Duchy of Austria or that which is currently used around the world.

To accompany this Austrian Thaler, which would act as his silver standard, Berengar also minted a gold coin of a similar design to go along with it; this would scarcely be used in anything other than transactions of significant sizes, as its value was too large.

This golden coin was named the Austrian Gulden and shared the aesthetic design of the Thaler, the primary difference being it was made out of 99.9% or 24ct gold and was in slightly different dimensions. While it still weighs one troy ounce and has a diameter of 1.5 inches, its thickness was smaller than the Austrian Thaler, with a thickness of 0.08 inches.

Berengar wanted a robust currency for his realm, and as such, he had decided that pure coinage, free of debasement was the best option. Thus, he had begun to put the massive stockpiles of gold and silver he had accumulated over the years into producing these two coins.

After establishing the new currency, Berengar also enacted another law which was the Banking Act of 1420. In this act, he founded a national Bank which was open to citizens of all social standing; this bank could be used to hold currency and distribute loans, among other things.

With these two economic reforms being established, Berengar could claim that control of the nation's economy was thoroughly centralized in the hands of his Dynasty. As such, a broad smile was on his face as he gazed at the silver and gold coins that were in his hands.

While he gazed at the coins that displayed his appearance without the eye injury, he was pretty pleased with the way they had turned out. They did not appear like the poor depictions one could find on most medieval coins and instead looked semi-lifelike, much like a modern coin.

The process used to create these coins was quite advanced; Berengar utilized the rolling press machine from his previous life. This device used two cylindrical dies that impressed designs on bullion which rolled between them. Once this bullion was imprinted and rolled, the coins were then punched out from the material with a water-powered hammer.

Because of this process, most of the coins were relatively uniform and virtually indistinguishable from one another. The actual presentation of the image on the coins was also exceptionally higher than the old hammer coins that other countries were currently using.

While Berengar was admiring the set of coins in front of him; he was utterly unaware that Honoria had slipped into the room. She ever so slightly nudged the door open and slid into the room on her knees, which was below the sight of Berengar's desk.

As such, she crawled over to Berengar with a wicked smile carved upon her luscious lips. There was only one purpose for so stealthily entering the room, and that was to scare Berengar.

The young princess eventually rounded the corner of the desk on Berengar's right side, which was the side of his wounded eye, before silently standing up behind Berengar; when the young Duke least expected it, the girl pounced on him with a hug, shocking him in the process.

Berengar's first instinct was to smack the girl; however, he ever so slightly managed to refrain from doing he noticed the culprit was Honoria. As such, he grabbed ahold of her perfect pale cheeks and slightly pulled on them while chastising the young princess as if she were an errant child.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack! What the hell were you thinking!?"

Seeing that Berengar was not as entertained as she was, Honoria began to pout in response to the scolding she had received. She just wanted to play a prank on Berengar; there was no reason for him to overreact so much.? As such, the sly little vixen decided to shift the topic to avoid an apology.

"So, what are those coins for?"

Berengar, who was too enamored with the coins he had produced, quickly fell for Honoria's trick and began to lecture her on his new currency.

"This is the new centralized Austrian currency. In the future, this silver coin will become the staple of our economy. It is made purely out of silver, so its value is substantially higher than the previously issued coins."

When Honoria heard this, she was quite surprised; even the Byzantine currency was extensively debased. Thus Berengar's ambitions to create a pure silver coin were ambitious. However, she had a rough estimate of the wealth Berengar had amassed in terms of silver and gold after expanding into and monopolizing so many businesses; if anyone could do such a thing, it would be him.

Honoria grabbed ahold of one of the gold coins from Berengar's grasp and closely observed its features. She then realized that the technology Berengar was using to make these coins must be exceptionally advanced, as the coins were nearly identical to one another. The presentation of his face was exceptional by current standards.

Seeing his handsome visage embossed on a coin made Honoria excited so she kissed him on the cheek before whispering in his ear.

"As long as these coins exist, people will remember how handsome you were! That is an impressive feat if you ask me..."

Berengar chuckled at this before he shoed the girl away from him; he did not have time for her games at the moment.

"Honorina, sweetheart, I am busy with work. I will play with you and Linde later; go do something productive!"

With that said, Honorina began to pout once more as Berengar had not taken the bait; however, she eventually said nothing and blew Berengar off; it was his loss if he did not want to fool around, as such, she went out looking for Linde, maybe Berengar's other lover was doing something interesting that she could join in on.

Thus, Berengar was left by his lonesome as he finished off the paperwork regarding his economic overhauls. After many hours of administrative work, Berengar finally completed his workload for the day and sighed heavily after he had completed it. Only one thought escaped from his lips as he rested his weary head in his hands.

"I need to get somebody to do all of this paperwork for me..."

With that having been said, Berengar got up from his seat and sought out his two lovers, he needed to blow off some steam, and now that he was finished with his work, it was the perfect time to do so.

Chapter 298: Operation Thunder

Gunshots echoed in the air as the small iron projectiles flew forth from the hand cannons and into the torso of the advancing knights who charged on foot at the defensive position. This attack resulted in several heavily armored knights losing their lives as the projectiles pierced through their armor at close range, turning them into bloody sieves.

Due to the introduction of barbed wire in the Bohemian conflict as means of Austrian aid, horses found it challenging to navigate the treacherous terrain. The Catholic Knights were forced to attack the Hussite positions on foot more often than not, leading them to walk into a wave of crossbow bolts and gunfire.

Close to two years had passed since the Hussite Wars had begun. During this time the Hussites had found themselves on the defensive. Still, due to the

Austrian forces' creative tactics and advanced technology, they could hold the line successfully and slowly deplete the alliance of Catholic parties who advanced upon them.

These Knights were from the Poland-Lithuanian commonwealth; after defeating the Teutonic State and seizing its territory, the Polish Knights answered the Pope's call to arms and marched on Bohemia.

After a swift victory over the Teutonic State, resulting in a small enclave of Teutonic Knights to exist in a fraction of its previous territory, the Polish Knights believed that sweeping up the Hussite heretics would be a simple matter.

They were mistaken, as they met the stiffest resistance they had ever come across; by now, they had poured thousands of knights and men at arms into the field and lost almost all of them. If things continued this way, defeat was inevitable. As such, the Catholic forces were scratching their heads, thinking of a way to penetrate the Hussite territory; thus far, no significant gains had been made.

After gunning down the newest wave of crusaders, the Hussites began to reload their firearms, nearby was Eckhard, who stood at the frontlines of this war, overseeing the static defenses that had been made to counteract the Catholic invasion.

Eckhard estimated that it would not be long before Berengar entered a war with the Holy Roman Empire for his independence; as such, he needed to continue his efforts here in Bohemia to distract the Catholic forces for some time yet.

With that in mind, the Crusaders began to charge at the static positions once more; as they did so, Eckhard instructed the men nearby to hold their fire.

"Hold! Hold your fire!"

Many of the men were aware of the current plan and began to have wicked grins as they imagined the result of the trap that had been laid for the Catholic armies who rushed towards their position.

Somewhere between the Crusader's encampment and the stone fortress established at the border of Hussite territory was a deep ditch that had been dug; to get to the defense, one would have to cross over this ditch.

This ditch was not a moat as it was dug much further out than the fortress's walls; in fact, it had been used as a line of cover for the crusaders before they advanced on the Hussite's position. Until now, the catholic commanders considered the Hussite officers to be grossly incompetent for creating such a defensive position for their enemies.

Because of this, the crusaders had begun to rely on this ditch to block the initial volley of the Hussite handgunners and then charge at their position while they were reloading. At this point, it was second nature for the Catholics to do so; once more, the crusaders jumped into the ditch.

This was their most considerable charge yet, with thousands of soldiers entering the trench line; they did not realize that several thousand pounds of TNT provided by the Austrian military were embedded within this trench system. The Hussites had been waiting for them to make such a massive mistake.

After close to ten thousand soldiers entered the trench system, they waited for the Hussites to unload their initial volley before charging. However, the volley never came. Instead, they could hear the voice of the Hussite commander, who in this case was Eckhard scream his orders at the top of his lungs.

"Now!"

The moment Eckhard said this, the detonators to the TNT were initiated and, in doing so causing a massive explosion to erupt within the trench line, instantly engulfing thousands of crusaders in the resulting explosive blast. Fire and smoke filled the air surrounding the trench line as the flames spread to every soul unfortunate enough to survive the vicious attack.

Blood-curdling screams echoed in the distance as blood, bone, and sinew were scattered about. It was a truly horrific sight to behold; however, before the Hussites could calm their stomachs, the whistle blew signaling their duty to charge, and as such, thousands of Hussites exited their fortifications and

ran over the trench line filled with burnt corpses and the ash of those consumed in the explosion.

With bills, spears, swords, hand cannons, and crossbows in hand, the Hussites charged into the Crusader's encampment where few of their soldiers remained, terrified by the sight of the massive explosion as if the gates to hell themselves had opened on the battlefield.

Before these crusaders could react, the Hussites were upon them, bringing with them the judgment of heaven as they descended upon the catholic forces who remained within the camp. Thunderous blasts of hand cannons echoed in the air as their projectiles pelted the surviving crusaders.

Bolts followed alongside the iron projectiles of the hand cannons creating a massive display of violence; after the initial volley had been fired, the melee combatants charged into the fray, skewering the disoriented crusaders with their weapons in a slaughter so brutal that only the devil could enjoy such a sight.

During the ensuing violence, Eckhard, alongside his attache of military advisors, stayed within the fortress, observing the sight with a bitter expression. The veteran field marshal could not help but sigh in defeat as he watched the bloody scene.

"So much death, and for what? A difference of opinion over the word of God? Such a pointless waste of lives..."

The more Eckhard waged this religious war, the more exhausted he felt inside. If not for the orders he was given by Berengar, he would have left his role as the chief military advisor to the Hussites long ago.

In his eyes, Berengar's wars were somewhat justifiable; after all, the man had been suppressed by many forces and was fighting back against them. His goal of unifying the German people into a single coherent Empire was also noble and worth fighting for.

However, this war was fought simply over religious differences, and tens of thousands of men had already died in the conflict. Was the Pope so blinded by power that he would allow such a thing to happen? The more the Catholics

resisted the Hussite Reformation, the more Eckhard was convinced that their creator did not design mankind with peace in mind.

This war had been exhausting both mentally and spiritually for the Field Marshal of Austria, and he knew the moment it was over, he would likely be defending his homeland from the same degree of nonsensical bloodshed.

Thus as Operation Thunder came to a close, Eckhard could not help but desire to have a drink as quickly as possible; in doing so he hoped to forget the discomforting thoughts that plagued his mind. Despite the state of despair he felt for the ongoing conflict in Bohemia, the war would continue to wage on.

However, with this victory, the Hussite forces had crushed the vanguard of the Catholic troops who attempted to invade their territory, and thus the roles were now reversed; the next stage of the Bohemian Conflict would soon begin as the Hussite armies started their advance into Catholic held territory.

Chapter 299: Declaration of Independence

Months had passed since Berengar's birthday, and it was now July 17th, 1421. This day would forever be remembered in German History within this world as a critical day in Berengar's schemes to unite the German people into a single cohesive Empire.

At the moment, Berengar had gathered together all of the significant noblemen, and the political representatives of the Duchy of Austria, whether they be common man or nobility. The gathering in the Castle of Kufstein was quite lively, as many of these men were from vastly different social standings.

Nonetheless, they were not informed why they were summoned and were impatiently waiting upon Berengar's arrival. As a man with a taste for flair, he had decided to be fashionable late to this important meeting.

An hour had passed after all of the representatives arrived before Berengar personally displayed himself. He was dressed in the most luxurious attire he had, set in the colors of his house; his renaissance style clothing had an elegant dalmatian fur overcoat over it as he strode up to his Ducal throne and sat upon it authoritatively.

After sitting there in silence for a few moments, waiting for the voices to calm down, Berengar finally voiced his intent for gathering so many important figures to his abode. However, the manner that he performed it was different than anyone was expecting.

"Guards, bring in the prisoner!"

With that decree, the heavily armored soldiers of Berengar's personal guard left the room before dragging a swiss man who was bound and chained. Evidently, The man had been interrogated quite ruthlessly, as there were signs of physical abuse on his person.

After being tossed in front of Berengar's feet and forced to kneel by the nearby guards, Berengar stared at the man with a cruel smile upon his face before giving him an order.

"Tell these men who have gathered here on this day what you have confessed to me!"

The swiss man had dirty blonde hair and dark eyes. His hair was unkempt, and his appearance haggard; he gazed around at the various Austrian men of different social statuses with confusion, trying to understand what was about to occur.

However, Berengar grew impatient and slammed his fist on his armrest, alerting the man to his fury. As such, the man immediately began to declare his guilt and the reason for his imprisonment.

"I am a spy sent by Emperor Balsamo Corsini with the intent to sabotage Austrian development. My compatriots and I were caught red-handed in the act by the Austrian Department of Intelligence, and at this moment, I confess to the sins I have committed of my own free will."

The moment the Swiss man said these words, the crowd began to erupt in debate.

"The Emperor seeks to cripple Austria? For what purpose!"

"This is an attack on our entire Nation and must be met with recourse!"

"Damned Italians, always butting their heads into Austrian affairs, I say we give them a taste of their own medicine!"

Various voices of contention erupted in the Great Hall of Kufstein; however, after a while, Berengar tapped his armrest loudly, instantly calming the men who had gathered.

"Order! I want order in my great hall! If you have any questions, direct them to the prisoner one at a time!"

As such, the men began to calm themselves. Marquess Otto holding an essential position in Berengar's Council was the first to address his concerns to the Swiss agent.

"Why would the Emperor do such a thing to our Duchy? We have not provoked him in any way!"

The swiss agent immediately looked over at Berengar, who gave him a silent murderous glare; this glance was enough to inform the spy of the penalty he would face for lying. As the chills invaded the prisoner's spine, he immediately confessed what he knew about the matter.

"The Emperor fears the rapid growth of Austria and is terrified of the prospect that Berengar might challenge him and his authority. As such, he has sent hundreds of agents into Austria with the intent to sabotage your industry.

However, your industrial districts are heavily guarded, and we had no way to infiltrate them; as such most of us have failed in our tasks!"

Upon hearing this, the Austrian representatives became thoroughly enraged; the Emperor had violated the terms of vassalage. As far as the men gathered in the great hall were concerned, this was an act of war. As such, they began to erupt with fury in response to these claims.

One political representative of common birth was the first to protest the Emperor's actions.

"Bastard! There must be war!"

Immediately after he spoke, a minor nobleman followed with an even more vicious response.

"If they seek to destroy Austria, we should show them the power of Austrian steel! I would like to see who dares to bully us now that our military prowess is unrivaled in all of Europe! I volunteer to lead an incursion into Northern Italy to drive this false Emperor from his throne of lies!"

After this was said, an argument broke out between the politicians and noblemen within the chamber.

"You! You are but a small Baron and have no prior military experience; what gives you the right to lead an army! I am a colonel in the armed forces and a Viscount; I should be the one to lead the army to victory against the Empire!"

The two noblemen began to verbally spar with one another until Berengar once more pounded his armrest, signaling them all to calm themselves. After this action, the room fell deathly silent as Berengar, with a stoic gaze on his face that expressed the personification of a sovereign monarch, made his official declaration of Independence.

"In response to these scandalous actions by the Holy Roman Emperor who has betrayed the rights of vassalage, I hereby declare the Independence of our realm and the formation of the Kingdom of Austria! I Berengar von Kufstein first of my name, and rightful sovereign of Austria decree that henceforth I shall be the monarch of Austria and all of its people as granted to me by right of conquest, and the support of the Lord almighty!"

After saying this, Marquess Otto stood at attention as he saluted Berengar with a gaze of firm determination on his face.

"Hail to the King!"

The moment he did so, the various politicians and noblemen gathered in the great hall responded in the same manner without hesitation. These men immediately formed ranks and pounded their chests in salute as they repeated the words spoken by Marquess Otto.

"Hail to the King!"

Upon seeing this, a cruel smile curved upon Berengar's lips; he felt it was inappropriate to hail to himself, and as such, a wicked idea formed in his mind as he chanted the following words while saluting his subordinates.

"Hail Victory!"

With those words stated, the men present formally drafted a declaration of Independence and the formation of the Austrian Kingdom. As such, they handed the letter to the Swiss spy and informed him to give their regards to the Emperor.

On this day, Austria had become an Independent Kingdom, in doing so, brought war to its doorstep that would soon shatter the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire. After all, the loss of Austria was not only a blow to the face of the Holy Roman Emperor but his treasury as well, one that he could ill afford.

Chapter 300: Thousands of Feet March to the Beat

Captain Arnwald was a soldier who had been among Berengar's forces since the very beginning. He was present at the battle in Schwaz, where the enemy had ambushed Berengar's forces during Berengar's Campaign for Tyrol.

During that time He was only a private; despite this, he had survived in Berengar's various campaigns until now and eventually completed officer school. As a man of common birth, he had risen through the ranks of Berengar's meritocratic system and become a full-fledged captain.

At the moment, he led a Grenadier company, which was the highest honor among infantry officers. For the past few years, his company was tasked with protecting the Austrian borders on the edge of Bavaria.

Due to the peace agreement with Duke Dietger of Bavaria, there had been little more than a few skirmishes with brigands trying to enter Austria from the chaotic region of Bavaria. Aside from that, his job was mainly facilitating the temporary housing of German Refugees from the North.

However, overnight, his peaceful world was shattered, as the leaders of Austria declared their independence from the Holy Roman Empire and the

formation of the Kingdom of Austria. Such a decree was a bold slap to the Emperor's face and the German Dukes.

As a grenadier company, his unit was fully mustered from their relaxed position and had begun shipping off to the Italian border. Though news had not yet arrived in the rest of the world about Austrian independence, King Berengar was not wasting time when it came to deploying his troops.

Every soldier he could get to the Swiss and Italian borders was an advantage in the upcoming days of the conflict. At the moment Arnwald clutched the dog tags in his hand with a downcast expression on his visage.

Though he had personally survived Berengar's wars, his comrade Bardo who fought alongside him for so many years had unfortunately perished in battle. As such, the Captain never forgot the loss of the man who had come to be his best friend during their tenure in Berengar's armed forces.

After nearly three years of peace, the Austrian armies were on the march again, and Arnwald prayed that he might live to see the future of his homeland and the glory he knew awaited it. If there was one comforting thought, it was the fact that King Berengar would once more be leading their armies into battle.

The man reflected on the past, and how at one point, he had fought side by side with a man who was now King; the very idea filled him with pride, as a warrior and as an Austrian. As he thought about such things Captain Arnwald marched alongside his soldiers to the songs of the marching band as they made their way from the Bavarian border to the Italian Alps.

At a marching speed of 3.4 miles per hour, it would take them roughly 82 hours to reach the Italian border. However, there would need to be stops along the way, so it would take them approximately a week to arrive at their destination.

By the time the Emperor received word of the Austrians Declaration of Independence, Berengar would already have an army had amassed at his enemy's borders. As for the Navy of Austria, the sly young King had already begun to sail his forces towards the Venetian coast. However, that was a story for another time.

As the soldiers marched towards Italy, they came across a small village within Austria; like most villages, this one was protected by a nearby garrison; upon seeing the men of Austria go to war, the women and children came out from their homes and laid flowers down in the street.

Despite none of the men in this unit being from this village, the people of Austria showed respect for its warriors who fought for their sovereignty. As such, the men in uniform gazed upon the villagers with solemn expressions.

None of them knew if they would survive the upcoming war, and thus they gazed upon many of the pretty young girls with lament in their hearts. Some of these soldiers were married with children, others were single, but these soldiers reflected on the lives they would live should they survive the remainder of the duration of their service.

Eventually, the company of grenadiers stopped outside of this village and made camp for the night. They were not the only unit marching towards the Italian border, and as such, Arnwald approached his superior officer, who was smoking some hemp in the form of a cigarette.

Berengar was not the only one who had formed a habit of calming himself with the properties of the miraculous flower; considering it did not cause a high effect, Berengar had begun processing a portion of his hemp flowers into cigarettes to distribute to his soldiers after all without tobacco, something would be needed to calm their nerves, and alcohol was forbidden in the field.

Berengar was a massive fan of hemp; it was a miraculous material that could make several sustainable products, such as paper. Due to the benefits of hemp Berengar had begun to grow more of the substance to make paper rather than cut down trees. As such, not only were the cigarettes filled with hemp, but they were rolled with hemp-based papers.

When Arnwald entered the command tent and saw the colonel smoking, he immediately saluted. However much to his surprise, the Colonel lacked any form of formality and merely handed Arnwald one of his cigarettes.

Upon seeing this Arnwald grabbed ahold of the hemp cigarette and lit it with a match before smoking the substance. As he did so, his nerves calmed, and he began to report to his commanding officer.

"Colonel, the troops, have finished setting up the camp and are preparing for rest, food has been distributed, and sentries are on watch. Any man who attempts to desert will be captured and put before a firing squad."

After hearing this, the Colonel nodded. He was an old Knight, from the days of Sieghard's rule, and under Berengar, had seen the transformation of medieval warfare into the form of semi-modern war. As such, he was not surprised in the slightest that Berengar would be bold enough to declare himself King of Austria.

Because Austria's military was among the largest in all of Europe and was undoubtedly the best armed and trained among them, there was no longer a need to be a part of the so-called Holy Roman Empire.

As such, the man took a deep puff before releasing it; after doing so, he sighed heavily as he spoke to Arnwald with a complicated expression.

"75,000 men marching to the drums of war, have you ever seen anything like it, Captain Arnwald?"

Arnwald was surprised to hear the Colonel speak in such a manner; as such, he contemplated on his words. Over the past year, Berengar's main focus in military matters was expanding the Navy, but that did not mean he neglected the army.

Austria could project 75,000 men onto the battlefield; however, that was not the total size of the army, as garrisons existed across every city and district within Austria, enough to defend their borders while the Grand Army was at war. After reflecting upon this Arnwald responded to the Colonel's question with another question.

"What do you think our chances of winning are?"

To this, the middle-aged man chuckled before responding with a confident glint in his steel-blue eyes.

"Unless that King of ours suddenly returns to the form of the sickly, foolish, and lazy brat he once was, I'd say the odds are heavily in our favor."

Arnwald had nearly forgotten the rumors that plagued Berengar in his youth; after all, the man had proven them wrong in so many ways, it was not something one usually thought of when they heard the name Berengar von Kufstein, not anymore, that is.

However, as a Knight in Sieghard's service, the Colonel seemed to know the reality of the situation and, as such, began to scoff as he reflected on the past.

"If you were to tell me five years ago that Berengar von Kufstein would rise to the position of King of Austria within my lifetime, I would assume you were possessed. How that boy managed to change his destiny in such a short period, I will never know."

Upon hearing this, Arnwald was naturally curious and thus asked the question on his mind.

"Were the old rumors true?"

In response to this, the Colonel silently nodded with a bitter expression on his face; he knew talking about such things in any detail would only bring him trouble, and as such, he no longer dwelled upon it; instead, he gave Arnwald his orders.

"Get some rest while you still can; this march of ours is about to be the last peaceful days you see for a while."

With that said, Arnwald saluted the Colonel before departing towards his tent; he spent the rest of his waking hours reflecting on what the Colonel had said; with this, the Captain's admiration for Berengar grew considerably more significant. After all, to go from a weak, petty, and indolent wastrel to the King of Austria in just a few years was beyond impressive; it was practically otherworldly.